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Children drawing their own conclusions:

Children's perceptions of a 'post-conflict' society

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Abstract

In societies emerging from conflict/war, sustained occurrence of violence appears to be a common feature. In Northern Ireland, while incidents of violent deaths and injuries specifically related to the political conflict have decreased dramatically since 1998, regular riots and paramilitary activity confirm continuing division and conflict. The study described here explored children's perceptions of their own lives and their predecessors' lives in the country, through a draw-and-tell technique (n=179). While multiple positive elements of peace/hope were depicted by the majority of children, especially in the pictures portraying the present, negative elements and violent references mostly appeared in the pictures representing the past. Violence was more likely to be portrayed by boys, older children, and those attending segregated education.

Key words: drawings, political conflict, children, violence

Introduction

Children have been regarded as the hope for a peaceful society in countries that have just come out of a long political civil conflict. However, how do girls and boys in these societies understand war and peace? How do they view their countries' violent past and their "potentially peaceful" present? In Northern Ireland, young people have experienced directly or indirectly decades of political violence, as the country has lived with a situation of protracted civil unrest and conflict for over 30 years, a period colloquially known as "the Troubles" (late 1960s to mid-late 1990s). The Northern Ireland conflict, which has a considerably long history, is much more complex than simply a conflict between Catholics and Protestants, and whether Northern Ireland should be part of the Republic of Ireland or under the rule of Britain, as it involves issues of nationality, class, culture and religion.

Efforts to bring about a political settlement culminated in the bi-lateral paramilitary ceasefires in 1994, a peace agreement in 1998, and the announced decommissioning of paramilitary groups in 2005 and 2009. Currently, frequent rioting, the potential (and actual) "threat" from dissident paramilitary groups, and the existence of almost 60 peace walls, some almost 30 feet high, confirm the continuation of sectarian divisions, attitudes, and conflict (Jarman, 2005; Kennedy, 2001; McDonald, 2011). Thus, children, young people, and their families and communities, particularly those living in disadvantaged areas, still experience the many legacies of the conflict: sectarian incidents, residential segregation, punishment beatings and shootings, differential policing, significant mental health problems, poverty, and social exclusion (e.g., Connolly & Maginn, 1999; Dillenburg, Fargas, & Akhonzada, 2008; McAlister, Scraton, & Haydon, 2009). Nonetheless, Northern Ireland has come a long way out of armed conflict. Incidents of violence specifically related to the Troubles have decreased

dramatically since 1998. The historic developments of 8th May 2007, which resulted in the restoration of devolution with a power-sharing government, have signalled the beginning of a new era for Northern Ireland. Reaching this point has required huge efforts by many people, and the human and social cost of the Troubles has been high, with approximately 3,722 people killed (McKittrick, Kelters, Feeney, Thornton, & McVea, 2007), over 40,000 injured (Fay, Morrissey, & Smyth, 1998), thousands intimidated and/or forced to move home, and approximately 88,000 bereaved households (i.e., lost a close relative) (Hillyard et al., 2005).

Children's understandings of peace and war

In 2011, 37 armed conflicts were being fought in 30 locations throughout the world (Themnér & Wallensteen, 2012). In order to break this cycle, a full understanding is necessary of how children view war and peace, and how the transition between war and peace is handled between generations. This issue has been addressed by a considerable number of studies (e.g., Hakvoort & Hägglund, 2001; Myers-Bowman et al., 2005; Souza et al., 2006). These studies provide some evidence that children's understandings vary depending on intertwined factors, such as where the children live, the political situation of the time, their own experiences of violence, as well as individual characteristics such as age and gender.

Early studies adopted a cognitive-developmental perspective. Consequently, age was found to be an important variable that influenced children's understandings of war and peace (Alvik, 1968; Cooper, 1965; Haavelsrud, 1970). It seems that younger children tend to understand war in a "concrete" way, emphasising the instruments (e.g., weapons) and activities of war (e.g., fighting or killing), while older children are able to identify the more "abstract" aspects, such as the negative consequences of war (e.g., people lying dead or injured) and its emotional impact (Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1998). The debate is whether

the understanding of peace develops later than the understanding of war (e.g., Alvik, 1968; Covell, Rose-Krasnor, & Fletcher, 1994; Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1993) or not (Hall, 1993).

With regard to gender differences, girls seem to be able to define peace more precisely than boys (Hall, 1993; Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1998), while boys seem to understand peace earlier than girls (Hakvoort, 1996). When asked to define war, girls tend to refer more to objects of war and less to activities of war than boys (Cooper, 1965; Haavelsrud, 1970), yet when asked to draw, more boys (96%) than girls (84%) depicted images of weapons and soldiers, and more girls (30%) than boys (24%) drew images of negative consequences of war (McLernon & Cairns, 2001). In Beirut, when children (N=405) were asked to draw their neighbourhoods and what was going on there, all violent incidents including a weapon were drawn by boys, and involved men as both victims and perpetrators, while girls drew more positive elements, such as children playing, trees or flowers, than boys did (Usta & Farver, 2005). However, in a study examining children's perceptions of neighbourhood violence and safety in the USA, no significant gender differences were found in terms of how much violence was depicted in their pictures of what was going on in their neighbourhood (Farver et al., 2000).

Socio-political variables, such as the cultural context and children's level of exposure to violence, are also crucial. For instance, in a recent study on children's perceptions of the 2003 Iraq war, some North American children understood the war as a way to help people in Iraq, while none of the Northern Irish children in the sample shared this view (Blankemeyer et al., 2009). Some studies, where children have been asked to draw their neighbourhoods (e.g., Lewis et al., 1994; Lewis & Osofsky, 1997; Rudenberg et al., 2001), have clearly shown how

children's level of exposure to violence has an impact on their own perceptions. For instance, in the USA, Farver and colleagues (2000) found that children living in high violence areas felt unsafe when playing outdoors and drew more violent incidents (when asked to draw what was going on in their neighbourhoods), than did children living in low violence areas.

Thus, children's perspectives on their neighbourhoods and the concepts of conflict and peace often depend on the area where they live. Regarding their perspectives on their neighbourhoods, Northern Irish young people's exposure to political violence and perceptions of what is "normal" in a certain area seem to hugely vary across the region (Magill, Smith, & Hamber, 2009). Leonard (2007) found that between a third to half of the teenagers from three of the four participating schools in her study, who lived in North Belfast, defined their homes as unsafe, and described dangers related to the political conflict between the two communities; particularly those living at the edge of the interface, who gave accounts of incidents of their homes having been attacked. In 2007, 5% of the 16 year-old respondents of the Young Life and Times Survey did not feel safe in their own neighbourhoods (ARK, 2007); in 2003, 59% of the Protestant respondents felt less safe in mainly Catholic areas, while 61% of the Catholic respondents felt less safe in mainly Protestant areas (ARK, 2003); and in 2004, 30% of the respondents had a family member or friend that had been injured due to a sectarian incident and 8% had directly been threatened by a paramilitary group (Morrow, 2008).

In relation to how children make sense of the concepts of war and peace, a study conducted just after the peace agreement in 1998 asked young Catholics aged between 13 and 18 years old in six schools in Northern Ireland (two in West Belfast; two in a town in Co.Down; and two in the Creggan area of Derry) how they imagined and defined community

and peace (McEvoy, 2000). Peace was understood as secure environments, and coexistence and non-interference. It was found that in general, the West Belfast students were hopeful and perceived peace in positive terms, while the County Down students and particularly the male students in Derry, pessimistically declined to conceptualize peace at all.

Although research has been conducted on children's general understanding of war and peace in a variety of societies, little is known about children's understanding of the present and past of transitioning societies. To what extent do they perceive the present and past as peaceful or/and violent? The study reported in this paper addressed this gap, by asking children in Northern Ireland to express views, opinions, and feelings about their own lives and about their predecessors' lives through drawings.

This study

The aim of the study was to explore how children born after the peace agreement, and therefore with no memory of the Troubles, perceive life in Northern Ireland in the present times and in the past, before they were born. How do they feel it is like growing up in their neighbourhoods? Do they feel there is peace? What knowledge do they have of the Troubles? How did they gain this knowledge? Children born after the peace agreement might be in the best place to answer these questions. In fact, the methodological framework underpinning this research starts from the premise that children are social actors who can express themselves in their own right, and who are experts on their own lives.

The two main hypotheses that are explored in this paper are the following:

- Children born after the peace agreement view Northern Ireland as a peaceful society, as they do not tend to experience political violence first hand; and

- Children's perceptions of their country's past and present will vary depending on their age, gender and the type of school they are attending.

Method

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Queen's University Belfast Research Ethics Committee. Permission to carry out the research was granted from the principal of each participating school.

Once school principals had granted access to the children, and the teachers had agreed to take part, the teachers handed out letters to the children to give to their parents. The letters contained: 1) an information sheet with information on the research and what the children and the parents themselves would be asked to do; and 2) a refusal form. We sought opt-out parental consent for participation of child participants. Those parents who did not consent completed the refusal form and gave it back to the school. An opt-out approach was used for a number of reasons. First, it was considered that schools, in particular school principals, as gatekeepers acting in *loci parentis*, and thus having legal responsibility for the pupils' wellbeing in that setting, had already actively consented to the research taking place, and agreed with the opt-out approach for the parents. Second, we paid careful attention in choosing the topics of the drawings to be general, and not sensitive in nature. There has been more debate around the opt-out approach, when the research touches on sensitive areas, such as sexuality and drugs (e.g., Testa & Coleman, 2006; White et al., 2004). Third, the opt-out approach appeared to be a valid way of consent, since some parents returned the refusal form for their children not to take part. Finally, it was considered that due to increased response cost, an opt-in approach could have reduced and biased the sample (Esbensen et al., 1999;

White et al., 2004), as evidence has been found that parents that return consent forms are somewhat different from those who do not return them (Jason et al., 2001).

We also sought assent from the children prior to participation. After about two weeks, the researcher (and first author) contacted the school to find out if any refusal forms had been returned. If most of the parents of the children in a class did not return refusal forms, she informed children in that class about the research in very simple terms: what their participation involved; and about privacy and confidentiality issues. She then asked if they would like to take part. The first author reassured the children that it was ok if they did not want to take part (and those who refused were never questioned), and that their participation was entirely voluntary. This information was given in the class, before starting the data gathering process. Before the researcher entered the classroom, the teacher gave an information sheet (specifically designed for children) to the children to ensure that they were informed prior to agreeing to participate.

Participants

Three different types of schools took part. The school system in Northern Ireland is highly segregated along sectarian lines; with the majority of children (95%) attending either maintained (Catholic) or controlled (mostly Protestant) schools, both publically funded. Controlled schools are managed by Education and Library Boards through Boards of Governors, usually containing representatives from the Protestant churches, parents, teachers and nominees of the ELBs. Voluntary maintained schools are owned by trustees, and managed by Boards of Governors. The majority are Catholic maintained schools, which fall under the domain of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), established by the 1989 Order. Integrated schools are also managed by a Board of Governors, and are funded by

the Department of Education (Lundy, 2000). Integrated schools have been established to bring together pupils and staff from all religious and non-religious backgrounds. Currently, there are more than 1000 schools in Northern Ireland, including 61 integrated schools, 41 of which are primary schools.

In total, 179 children (106 girls and 73 boys) from six primary schools in Northern Ireland took part. Thirty-seven children in the study attended an integrated school; while 71 attended one of three controlled schools, and 71 attended one of two maintained schools. All the schools were co-educational, except for the two maintained schools; one of them was an all-boys school and the other one was an all-girls school. The integrated school was located in a rural seaside town, while the other five schools were all located in a socially disadvantaged area of Belfast, which has seen the worst of the conflict. All the children were born immediately after the peace agreement in Northern Ireland in 1998; 91 of them were 9-10 years of age and attended Primary 6 (P6), and 88 of them were 10-11 years of age and attended Primary 7 (P7). The numbers of participants by the variables of gender, age, and type of school are detailed in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1]

Research tool

The research tools consisted of: two A4 sheets of white paper, one with the heading '*Living in Northern Ireland now*' (Picture A), and one with the heading '*Living in Northern Ireland before I was born*' (Picture B). In order not to sensitise children to any issues (i.e., the Troubles and its legacies) and in contrast with previous research, the use of words such as "violence", "war", "the Troubles", or "peace" was avoided (Usta & Farver, 2005).

Brief interviews were used to prompt picture-related explanations, asking the child, “Can you tell me a bit about your drawing?”

Research procedure

The research setting was the children’s own classroom of the school they attended. Data collection took place at a time recommended by the classroom teacher, so as to cause the least amount of disruption to the normal school day. The researcher (first author) briefly explained to the children why they were asked to take part in the research: “We want to find out about what it is like for you to grow up in Northern Ireland, and how it was like for your parents to grow up here, and if they didn’t grow up here, for the people who were here before you were born”. Then, she asked the children to draw Picture A and Picture B, emphasizing that it was not a drawing competition, that they could draw whatever they felt in relation to the two topics, and that their explanation of each of the drawings was what she was most interested in. Drawing the two pictures took up to one hour. The researcher also asked the children to bring their drawings to a quiet corner of the classroom, where she asked them individually to briefly explain their pictures, and tape-recorded their responses.

Analysis

The researcher scanned the children’s pictures, inputted along the transcribed comments in the qualitative analysis package NVivo8 for PCs (Wiltshier, 2011), and analysed in line with these, using content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004). In other words, she examined children’s drawings and the accompanying narratives for recurring themes, identified thematic coding categories, and developed detailed codes, allowing categorisation of the drawings. Codes were mutually exclusive and exhaustive. This coding system incorporated elements of a system developed in the Netherlands by Hakvoort and Oppenheimer (1993) and adopted for

use in Northern Ireland by McLernon (1998) and McLernon and Cairns (2001), where responses involving weapons or soldiers were coded as categories for war, and responses suggesting the negation or absence of war were coded as categories for peace. It also combined selected themes from the analysis of drawings that Lewis et al. (1994) conducted on their study on children's perceptions of their neighbourhoods. Given that the concepts of peace and war were never mentioned during the data collection process in this research, other themes also emerged from the drawings (e.g., school, and friends or family issues). Thus, the key categories developed in this coding frame used in the present study combined these different themes, and were as follows:

- *Violence*, as defined by Lewis and Osofsky (1997), as “an act or behaviour that causes damage or injury, or human figures engaged in verbal threats or activity labelled as fighting, hitting, someone starting a fire, or robbery” (p. 283); but also including images associated with war, like soldiers, army barracks or tanks, even if not involved in violence in the picture; and mentions of fighting or riots in the children's comments. Themes included within this category were:
 - *Instruments of violence/war*, including weapons, soldiers and army bases, tanks, and bombs;
 - *Violent/war activities*, such as shooting, hitting, fighting, throwing bombs, etc;
 - *Negative consequences of violence/war*, such as death, injury, and houses on fire or in ruins; and
 - *Negative emotions*, such as people crying, or being frightened.
 - *Policing*, which included images of police officers and cars.

- *Awareness of sectarianism and community relationships*, which included two main themes:
- *Markers of difference*, such as clear reference to the two main ethno-political communities (i.e., Protestant and Catholics, or ‘Brits’ and ‘Republicans’); flags; marches/parades; and structural divisions (i.e., peace walls); and
- *Sectarian/political violence*, including references to paramilitary groups.
- *Negative elements* (other than violence), which included very diverse aspects of the country, neighbourhood or people’s lives that were not necessarily related with violence or conflict, but could be described as having more ‘negative’ rather than ‘positive’ connotations. Themes included here are:
 - *Accidents, death, and illness*;
 - *Hardship/poverty/unfairness*;
 - *Rubbish/litter*;
 - *Negative actions*, such as polluting or dropping litter;
 - *Negative emotions*, such as people crying or being sad; and
 - *Pollution*.
- *Positive elements of peace/hope*. Themes included within this category were:
 - *Nature*, including flowers, the sun, the sea, fields, animals, and pets;
 - *Close social network*, that is family and friends;
 - *Positive actions/activities*, such as playing, swimming, or having fun;
 - *Positive emotions*, such as people being happy or smiling;

- *Negation of war/violence*, which would include images of tranquillity or quietness, and images of the child's home or school, as well as references to freedom, rights, or wealth;
- *Achievements, festivities and celebrations*, such as passing a test, Christmas, special dates, or festivals;
- *References to peace*, that is, direct mention of the concept of peace.

Multiple categories could be found in each of the drawings and accompanying narratives. On the basis of these coding conventions, the first author (and researcher) analysed all drawings and comments, and for inter-observer reliability tests, a second coder independently coded (blind coding) 10% of the pictures based on the same framework. Inter-observer agreement of blind coding was 89%. For the remaining 11%, an agreed code was used for the analysis of results. The first author then inputted data from the drawings in SPSS for Windows, version 15.0 (SPSS INC., Chicago, 2006), and compared occurrence of each theme depicted in the drawings between age (P6s and P7s), gender (boys and girls), and type of school (those attending integrated, controlled, and maintained schools) groups, using Pearson's chi-square.

Results

Findings are presented here under the following five main headings, which correspond to the five key categories identified in the analysis of the children's drawings and comments: violence; policing; awareness of sectarianism and community relations/identity; negative elements; and positive elements of peace/hope.

Violence

Elements of violence, as previously defined, appeared in 80 pictures (22% of all pictures), drawn by 70 children (39% of all children). Most of these pictures depicted Northern Ireland's past ($n=64$; 36% of all Pictures B), although a few children depicted the present as violent ($n=16$; 9% of all Pictures A) as well. In total, the most common depiction of violence was violent activities or actions, portrayed in 63 drawings, while negative emotions appeared in only 20 drawings (see Table 2).

[Insert Table 2]

In 12 of the 16 Pictures A depicting violence, the police also featured; and the stories behind them often involved rioting, and throwing different things (e.g., paint bombs or bricks) at the police cars/jeeps. All of the children drawing these pictures were going to school in a very deprived area of Belfast. Seven of these 12 children did actually draw within the same P7 classroom in a controlled school, three were in the same P7 classroom in an all-boys maintained school, and two were in a P6 classroom in that same all-boys school. Thus, it could be argued that peers might have had an impact on what the children chose to draw. However, their stories were all different, and some appeared to have actually witnessed the event they drew (Figure 1):

This is a police land rover. When I was out playing, they were getting bricked in. It was getting bombed, and all the sirens were going. They were taking pictures of the people throwing them, so they can bring them into jail. [And when was that?] A year ago. (girl A, controlled school, P7)

... somebody was standing at the bus stop, but the bus didn't come, and they started throwing bricks, and people got damaged. [What did they damage?] They damaged a house, and the bus. They put the window through. (girl B, controlled school, P7)

In fact, one of the children in that class explained that he had actually been involved himself in that sort of behaviour, as he explains (Figure 1):

It's a church, and the windows are broken. Me and my friend, we got our names on the wall.

We broke all the windows, and there's the police. (boy A, controlled school, P7)

[Insert Figure 1]

The violent elements most common in the Picture A were violent activities (i.e., rioting, 'throwing bricks at the police', breaking church windows, throwing bombs, setting the church on fire) (n=13). Not as common were negative emotions (e.g., people crying or frightened because of bomb scares or being robbed) (n=7); negative consequences (e.g., demolished buildings; people being shot) (n=7); and instruments of violence/war (n=7). Children explained that these events either happened recently or/and that happened regularly:

A couple of weeks ago, (...) there was a bomb scare.

This is the church down my lane, and all the kids keep putting it on fire. ... [And is that often or did it happen once?] No, it happened about five times. [Recently?] Yeah.

Only 10 of the 64 children who represented violence in their Picture B specifically mentioned the "Troubles" (n=7) (i.e., the Northern Ireland conflict, 1969 – approx. 1994) or a well-known Troubles-related incident, such as the Shankill bomb (n=2) (i.e., an incident that occurred in 1993, when a bomb left by the IRA exploded in a fish shop in the Shankill Road in Belfast, killing nine civilians, including two children), while seven children talked about the World Wars or the Germans invading them or throwing bombs:

...when my daddy was born and all, and there was the Troubles, and the cars were burning and people were fighting and all. (girl C, maintained school, P6)

... it's like in the war here, like in the Troubles, and there's... people and they are from Germany, these ones, and then there's like killing all people... (girl D, controlled school, P7)

As shown in the comment of girl D, sometimes both conflicts were confused and mixed together. Most children, however, did not give a name to the violent events they described, which were varied and involved setting property (cars, churches, and houses) on fire, shootings and fights, bombings, etc. The most common elements of violence in Picture B were: violent activities (e.g., ‘killing all people’, fighting, rioting) (n=50), instruments of war/violence (e.g., bombs, ‘plastic bullets and petrol bombs’) (n=41), followed by negative consequences (e.g., ‘a car all burned up’) (n=28), and negative emotions (e.g., ‘people being sad’) (n=13).

Regarding gender differences in terms of the *violence* code, a higher proportion of boys depicted violence in one or both of their pictures compared to girls (49% vs 32%, $p < 0.05$). There were also clear age statistically significant differences, in that a higher proportion of children in the P7 classes than those in the P6 classes portrayed violence in some way in one or both of the pictures (48% vs 31%, $p < 0.05$). The differences were starker in Picture A, where a smaller percentage of children in P6 portrayed violence, compared to children in P7 (4% vs 14%, $p < 0.05$). Finally, significant differences were also found regarding the type of school attended, with a higher proportion of children attending maintained schools drawing or talking about violence than those attending controlled and integrated schools (51% vs 38% and 19%, $p < 0.01$).

Policing

In total, 27 pictures (7%), drawn by 25 children (14%), depicted policing. Fifteen children (8%) depicted the police in their Picture A, and 12 children (7%) portrayed policing in Picture B, with violence appearing in most of them (n=9). In these pictures, the police was

present in the midst of fighting, being attacked by people throwing things at them (similarly to the pictures about now), or searching people.

Gender, age, and type of school differences also appeared for the category of *policing*. Regarding gender, a higher proportion of boys depicted this theme in their drawings compared to girls (20% vs 9%, $p < 0.05$). Although not significant due to small numbers, there were also differences in terms of the picture in which policing featured. *Policing* appeared in 7 Pictures A and 4 Pictures B drawn by girls, whereas boys portrayed this theme in the same amount of Pictures A ($n=8$) and B ($n=8$). As for age, more P7 children than P6 children represented *policing* (18% vs 10%) in their pictures, but this difference was not statistically significant. However, *policing* in the present (Picture A) was significantly more common in the drawings of P7 than those of P6 children (14% vs 3%, $p < 0.05$). As for school type, no children in the integrated school portrayed *policing* in any of their pictures, while a similar proportion of children in the maintained and controlled schools did (0% vs 18% and 17%, $p < 0.05$).

Awareness of sectarianism and community relations/identity

Awareness of sectarianism and community relations/identity was a theme that appeared in 24 drawings (7%), drawn by 22 children (12%). Seven of these (4%) were Picture A, and 17 (9%) were Picture B. *Markers of difference* appeared in 20 pictures, while *sectarian or political violence* appeared in 16 (see Table 3).

[Insert Table 3]

The most common *markers of difference* (between the two main ethno-political groups in the region: the Catholic community and the Protestant community) were flags ($n=9$), and the mention to the two communities (Catholics and Protestants, Republicans, ‘the brits’, two

different religions, etc) (n=9), while twelfth of July parades (n=3) and peace walls (n=2) appeared in a few pictures:

I did a church because... like a church could be for Protestants, I thought that it would be more chapels and churches around, because of Protestants have their own church, and Catholics have their own chapel, and I thought that it would be the thing to do, because the Protestants and Catholics have two different religions and have different thoughts. (girl E, maintained school, P6)

That's people building a bricked wall to separate our people from the Catholics. That's people building it, a big wall. (girl F, controlled school, P7)

Twelve children talked and drew about the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in the pictures regarding the past (Picture B) (Figure 2). They were all boys going to the same single-sex maintained school, and only one of them was in P6, while the rest were all in P7 together:

This is ... when the war was going on. It was the IRA versus the British army. (boy B, maintained school, P7)

It's a British trying to shoot somebody, and then an IRA person just hitting him on the head. (boy C, maintained school, P6)

[Insert Figure 2]

Thus, there were some differences between boys and girls in terms of portraying *awareness of sectarianism and community relations/identity*. Similarly to the codes of *violence* and *policing*, a higher proportion of boys than girls made reference to this category in one or both drawings (19% vs 7%, $p < 0.05$). However, even though this is not significant because of the small numbers, more girls (n=5) than boys (n=2) represented it in Picture A. All of the girls that portrayed *awareness of sectarianism and community relations/identity* in either or both pictures portrayed *markers of difference*, and only three of them depicted

sectarian/political violence. Regarding age, a quasi-significant difference was found, whereby a larger proportion of P7 children than P6 children portrayed *awareness of sectarianism and community relations/identity* (17% vs 8%, $p=0.057$). None of the children in the integrated school made any reference to this category, while most of those who did attended maintained schools and the rest attended controlled schools (0% vs 20% and 11%).

Negative elements

Negative elements, other than violence, were found in 51 drawings (14%), drawn by 47 children (26%). Most of the negative elements appeared in pictures about the past. The most common negative elements were: *accidents, death and illness*, figuring in 20 pictures; *hardship, poverty and unfairness*, appearing in 14 pictures; *negative emotions*, in 11; and *negative actions or activities*, in 10 drawings (see Table 4).

[Insert Table 4]

Negative actions in the present times comprised dropping litter, being chased by the police, looking for drugs, writing names on walls, and polluting. Concerns about rubbish being present in their neighbourhoods were voiced by three girls in the same P6 classroom in a single-sex maintained school, three girls in the same P7 classroom in a controlled school, and one P7 girl in the integrated school (Figure 3):

... I did rubbish beside bins, because if you are ever walking around in like the town, you see people throwing rubbish just at beside of the bin, and not putting it in the bin, so why not people just put it in the bin, instead of just setting it just right beside it. It's just like living in a dump.

(girl G, maintained school, P6)

As for Picture B, 12 children represented the Titanic in their pictures on the past, which was categorised as *accidents, death and illness*. Three of them attended the same P6 classroom in an all-boys maintained school, and nine attended the same P7 classroom in a

controlled school. Children often understood the past as being times of hardship and poverty, and when unfair actions/events occurred (n=14):

... You couldn't go to school if you were poor. (girl H, integrated school, P7)

... because I thought it would just be like all dark and dull because... it was back in the olden days, and they were all wearing black, but I didn't get time to colour. (girl I, controlled school, P6)

Images of children sweeping chimneys (n=3) were included in the category of *hardship, poverty and unfairness*. It is important to mention here that the Titanic and the Victorian times (involving children sweeping chimneys and forced to work) are part of the curriculum at Year 6 (P6) in the participant schools. *Negative emotions* was another of the most common codes in Picture B (n=9). Children who depicted this theme talked about feelings of sadness, fear, or not having a good time (Figure 3):

Living in Northern Ireland before I was born erm... I feel sad about the bad things that happened to my parents and people that they knew. (girl J, integrated school, P6)

[Insert Figure 3]

As for the differences found in terms of *negative elements*, a larger proportion of girls than boys (32% vs 18%, $p < 0.05$), and a higher percentage of P7 than P6 children (36% vs 17%, $p < 0.01$) depicted it in their pictures. Regarding type of school, a higher proportion of children attending controlled and integrated schools than those attending maintained schools (37% and 32% vs 13%, $p < 0.05$) portrayed *negative elements*.

Positive elements of peace/hope

The vast majority of children (n=164; 92%) depicted *positive elements of peace/hope* in their drawings (n=255; 71%). Most of these elements appeared in Picture A (see Table 5). These images were extremely varied, and included: *negation of war or violence* (i.e., images

of quietness/tranquillity, child's house or school, schools and play parks, and wealth) (n=121); *close social network* (i.e., family and friends) (n=97); *nature* (e.g., sun, grass, forests, fields, flowers, etc) (n=119); *positive actions* (e.g. playing, being nice or helping others, going for walks, swimming, etc) (n=115); and *positive emotions* (e.g., smiling, being happy, etc) (n=105). Only four children in their Pictures A specifically talked about or referred to peace or of being peaceful.

[Insert Table 5]

In Picture A, many children drew *positive actions or activities* (n=81), which mainly included play or fun activities. Within playing, there were gender differences in that football was mentioned by 17 boys and one girl, while skipping was depicted by three girls and no boys. Similarly, shopping was only portrayed by five girls. These activities were mostly those that the children enjoyed or regularly or recently took part in:

Well, I did it because I like living in Northern Ireland, and my favourite thing to do really is playing football. So, I drew... football. (boy D, integrated school, P7)

The code of *negation of war/violence* was also present in many Pictures A (n=85), and mostly consisted of images of the child's house (n=44), play parks (n=19), and schools (n=16).

Nature appeared in a large number of Pictures A (n=79), and it usually included the sun, flowers, fields, mountains, etc. Other common codes were *positive emotions* (n=75) (e.g., people smiling or being happy); and the child's *close social network* (n=51), which included family (n=22), especially parents (n=12) and siblings (n=6), and friends (n=33).

In Picture B, as it could be expected, the most common node, within this category, was *close social network* (n=46), in particular family (n=46), since the children explained and drew how it was like for their parents and grandparents to grow up in Northern Ireland. Other

common codes were *nature* (n=41), *negation of war/violence* (n=36) [including images of the children's past family house (n=19), schools (n=7) and quietness/tranquillity (n=6), and the argument that it was all the same as it is now (n=3)], positive actions (n=34), and positive emotions (n=30).

There were barely any age differences regarding the occurrence of *positive elements of peace/hope*, although a larger percentage of children in P6 than children in P7 tended to draw their house (32% vs 16%, $p<0.01$), whereas a higher proportion of children in P7 than children in P6 included positive emotions (58% vs 42%, $p<0.05$), and drew positive actions, such as children playing (67% vs 43%, $p<0.01$). In terms of gender, a larger percentage of girls than boys portrayed positive elements of peace/hope (95% vs 86%, $p<0.05$). Other significant differences among girls and boys were found regarding: nature (64% vs 36%, $p<0.01$); close social network (53% vs 29%, $p<0.01$); positive emotions (57% vs 38%, $p<0.05$); and negation of war/violence (65% vs 42%, $p<0.05$). There were no statistically significant differences regarding type of school, except that a larger percentage of children attending integrated schools than children in maintained and controlled schools portrayed positive emotions in one/both pictures (73% vs 56% and 31%, $p<0.01$).

Discussion

Studies that have focused on children's understandings of war and peace have concluded that children often associate peace with what it is not (i.e., they talk about the absence of war), rather than with what it is; while reflecting a "concrete" understanding of war, emphasising its violent activities, and negative emotions and consequences (Walker et al., 2003). However, do children in this study view Northern Ireland now as a "peaceful" society? Judging by the themes illustrated in their pictures on the present-day of Northern

Ireland (Pictures A), this might be the case for many of the participating children (as 88% depicted “positive elements” in that picture). In their Pictures A, many children (45%) depicted positive actions, such as playing or being nice to other people; which in other studies have been found to be attributed to the concept of peace. For instance, in a study on children’s understandings of the concepts of peace and war in the United States, peace was associated with ‘interpersonal interactions: being friends, shaking or holding hands, and giving to or helping another or playing together’ (Walker et al., 2003, p.194). Walker et al. (2003) found that 48% of the peace drawings reflected this theme, while 42% reflected the theme of peace as negative peace (i.e., what peace is not; peace as inactivity, the absence of conflict, or the end of war). Similarly, in this study, 47% depicted negation of war/violence in their Picture A.

In fact, images depicting positive elements of hope/peace were by far the most frequent, and were especially present in the pictures depicting the present (Picture A). Negative elements (other than violence) and violent references were mostly portrayed in the pictures representing the past. Thus, in general, children in the study illustrated the present in a more “positive” light than the past. However, policing appeared in slightly more pictures of the present than the past, but the difference was not significant.

Having said this, the children’s drawings suggested that in certain areas, despite the political peace process, some children still perceive violence, sectarian division, and policing as part of their every-day lives in their neighbourhood (i.e., 9% portrayed violence, 8% policing, 4% awareness of sectarianism in their Picture A). In only a few cases in this study, children appeared to be involved in the violence, in particular, vandalising churches and throwing bricks, paint bombs and other objects at the police. On other occasions, children were witnesses of the violence or affected by it in other ways. However, the study showed

how these events, especially rioting, appeared to be localised to certain socially disadvantaged areas, since none of the children in the rural integrated school depicted any such events in their pictures.

Thus, the vast majority of children in the study depicted their own and their predecessors' lives in a positive light, and multiple elements of peace and hope appeared in their drawings, which could arguably be seen as "normal" childhood drawings. In fact, even children living in the areas worst affected by the conflict emphasised the positive aspects of growing up in their neighbourhood, enjoying activities like playing or swimming. This ties in with findings from a survey of 442 young people attending secondary and grammar schools in Northern Ireland, in which over 70% of the participants described Belfast as a good place to grow up in, with one of the main reasons being family and friendship ties (Leonard & McKnight, 2010).

The findings extracted from the drawings and narratives point clearly towards the influence of education, gender, and age when it comes to perceptions of political violence vs. peace in a transitional society. Some of the differences among groups of children confirmed earlier findings from studies looking at children's perceptions of peace and war. For example, in terms of gender, more girls than boys represented negative emotions and consequences of war and violence, while more boys than girls depicted actions and instruments of war and violence (McLernon & Cairns, 2001). Girls also reported more positive elements of peace/hope than boys, substantiating results from studies where girls were more able to define peace compared to boys (Hall, 1993; Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1993; McLernon & Cairns, 2001). However, apart from differences, similarities between boys and girls were also found, with similar percentages portraying negative emotions resulting from war/violence, and equal

(small) numbers depicting violence in their Pictures A. In fact, these findings suggest that boys and girls had a similar “positive” (or optimistic and hopeful) view of Northern Ireland’s present, as the majority of them, in similar proportions, drew positive elements in Picture A.

As for age, a higher percentage of older children depicted violence and awareness of sectarian elements compared to younger children, and these differences are not due to a gender difference, as there were more older girls ($n=56$) than younger girls ($n=49$), and more younger boys ($n=42$) than older boys ($n=32$) in our sample (see Table 1). That might coincide with findings from other studies that have concluded that older children have a more sophisticated understanding of these issues, i.e., violence/war (e.g., Walker et al., 2003) and sectarianism (e.g., Cairns, 1987). However, as it is the case for the gender variable, similar numbers of children in both stages depicted positive elements.

As expected, a higher proportion of children living in the urban area and attending segregated education depicted violence, policing, and awareness of sectarianism compared to children living in the rural area and attending an integrated school. There were also some differences between children in all three types of schools, as more children attending maintained schools depicted violence, especially in Picture B; more children in controlled schools depicted consequences of war, and negation of war; a larger proportion of children in controlled and integrated schools (compared to those in maintained schools) portrayed negative elements (other than violence); and a larger proportion of children in integrated schools drew positive emotions. These differences could be viewed as mediated by the gender differences, as there was a lower proportion of boys in the integrated school (32%; 12/37) than in the controlled (41%; 29/71) and maintained schools (46%; 33/71) (although these differences in proportions are not significant) (see Table 1). However, as it is the case for

gender and age, an important similarity was found among children in all schools, i.e., a similar proportion of children (the majority) attending each school type depicted positive elements of peace/hope, particularly in their Pictures A.

There are obviously limitations to this study. For instance, the sample of children that took part does not allow for an exploration of the variation between urban and rural settings, thus we cannot draw firm conclusions as to whether living in urban and rural areas has an impact on children's understandings of their country's past and present. Furthermore, although this research helps examine children's views of living in a "post-conflict" society such as Northern Ireland now and their understandings of their recent local past, it does not allow us to explore the reasons behind them, as the study was largely quantitative, being conducted through short-term encounters with a large number of children in their own classrooms. This has implications for the conclusions, as the details on how children form these perceptions could not be explored in this study. A qualitative follow-up study, involving more in-depth (individual or group) interviews with the children, as well as their parents and teachers, could investigate these issues (i.e., whether, why and how parents communicate their experiences, grandparents' and schools' role in the transmission, how children understand parents' stories, other external influences, etc.) in more detail, and provide answers to the questions that this study has brought to light.

Conclusions

Despite these limitations, this study shed light to children's perceptions of their present-day lives in Northern Ireland, and the lives of their predecessors, and showed to what extent concepts of violence, conflict, and peace were featured in their perceptions. The study contributes to the international body of work into children's understandings of peace and war

(e.g., Cairns, 1987; McLernon & Cairns, 2006), although it arrives at different conclusions, due to the different approach taken to data collection (i.e., the broader character of the questions posed to the children). Thus, when not sensitised by ‘loaded’ stimuli (i.e., words such as ‘war’, ‘Troubles’, ‘peace’, and ‘conflict’), even children living in the worst affected areas by the conflict emphasised the positive aspects of growing up in their neighbourhood, enjoying activities like playing or swimming; and many appeared to know nothing or very little of the Troubles, some even confusing it with World War II.

In this study, as in other studies (Leitch, 2008; Leonard, 2007), the use of visual methods proved to be useful in order to uncover a wide range of views from a cohort of children growing up in the transitional phase from political violence to peace (whose parents grew up during the Troubles), and thus to break the “culture of silence” surrounding this political conflict.

Biographical notes

Montserrat Fargas is a Research Fellow in the Institute of Child Care Research at Queen’s University Belfast. She has worked as a researcher for nine years, and is currently conducting research on children, young people, and parents and carers. Dr Fargas has published a range of journal articles, is co-author of a book, and has presented papers in international conferences. Her research interests focus on the Northern Ireland Troubles and how the conflict has affected children/young people and women; gender differences in children's behaviour, understandings and expectations; and the perspectives of children in care and adopted.

Karola Dillenburger is Professor of Behaviour Analysis and Education and Director of the Centre for Behaviour Analysis at the School of Education at Queen’s University Belfast,

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Professor Dillenburger is a Board Certified Behaviour Analyst-Doctoral (BCBA-D) and has worked extensively in childcare, education, and therapeutic settings before being called to Queen's University Belfast. She has published widely, including six paper-copy books and one ibook, five multimedia training resources on DVDs and CD-ROMs, and over 50 academic peer-reviewed papers. She frequently is invited to teach or deliver international keynote addresses in USA, India, Europe, and Australia.

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Tables

Table 1

Participants characteristics

		Integrated	Controlled	Maintained	Total
P6	Girls	13	17	19	49
	Boys	5	18	19	42
P7	Girls	12	25	19	56
	Boys	7	11	14	32
Total		37	71	71	179

Table 2

Frequency of drawings containing different elements of violence

	Violence (total)	Instruments of war/violence	Violent/war activities	Negative consequences of violence/war	Negative emotions
Picture A	16	7	13	7	7
Picture B	64	41	50	28	13
Total	80	48	63	35	20

Table 3

Frequency of drawings containing different elements of 'awareness of sectarianism and community relations/identity'

	Awareness of sectarianism & community relations/ identity (total)	Markers of difference	Sectarian/political violence
Picture A	7	7	2
Picture B	17	13	14
Total	24	20	16

Table 4

Frequency of drawings containing different 'negative elements'

	Negative elements (total)	Accidents, death & illness	Hardship, poverty & unfairness	Negative actions	Negative emotions
Picture A	18	4	2	7	2
Picture B	33	16	12	3	9
Total	51	20	14	10	11

Table 5

Frequency of drawings containing different 'positive elements of peace/hope'

	Positive elements (total)	Negation of war/violence	Close social network	Nature	Positive actions	Positive emotions
Picture A	157	85	51	79	81	75
Picture B	98	36	46	41	34	30
Total	255	121	97	120	115	105

Figures

*Figure 1. Violence in Picture A (examples: Girl A, Girl B, and Boy A)*



Figure 2. References to paramilitary groups (examples: Boy B and Boy C)



Figure 3. Negative elements (examples: Girl G and Girl J)